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SUBJECT: UKRAINE: TALES OF SEVASTOPOL, A HERO CITY

Classified By: Political Counselor Aubrey A. Carlson for reasons 1.4(b, d)

1. (C) Summary: The presence of the Russian Black Sea Fleet pervades the historic Crimean city of Sevastopol, which is one of two municipalities in Ukraine directly administered by the central government. Relations between President Yushchenko-appointed city administrator Serhiy Ivanov and the locally elected Party of Regions-dominated city assembly are tense. The assembly has passed resolutions of no-confidence against Ivanov at least twice. On the national level, Yushchenko has twice vetoed laws that would give Ukrainian citizen resident in Sevastopol the right to directly elect their mayor, a result that would be certain to cede political control of Sevastopol (which voted overwhelmingly for then-PM Yanukovych in the 2004 presidential race) entirely to pro-Russia, pro-Yanukovych political forces. Most of our local contacts regarded agitation to make Russian a second state language (in addition to Ukrainian) to be an artificial issue of no particular relevance to residents. They highlighted potential problems with the conduct of the March parliamentary elections arising not from fraud but from poor organization and confusing new procedures. End summary.

2. (U) During a February 16 visit to Sevastopol, we met with Timofei Nikityuk of the independent, pro-democracy NGO Committee of Voters of Ukraine, Yuri Prokhorenko of pro-Presidential People's Union Our Ukraine's (PUOU) Leninsky municipal district party branch, Vadim Kolesnichenko of the opposition Party of Regions local headquarters, Arkady Filimonov of the Socialist Party local headquarters, Serhiy Kulik of the local Tymoshenko Bloc office (BYuT), and BBC stringer Alby Shudrya.

Sevastopol -- A Place Apart

3. (U) Tsarina Catherine II founded Sevastopol after the Russian annexation of Crimea, but the city is located on the site of the earlier Tatar city of Akhtiar while, even earlier, the Greek colony of Kherson, founded in 421 BC, utilized the deep natural harbor. Sevastopol's year-round access to the Black Sea led to its use as a naval base, beginning with the Russian Black Sea fleet in 1804. In the Crimean War in the mid-1800s, Sevastopol was subjected to a British siege and eventually was the site of the notorious (for the British) Charge of the Light Brigade. Sevastopol was designated a "hero city" of the Soviet Union for its resistance to a German invasion from 1941-42 during World War II. In 1954, Soviet leader Khrushchev transferred administrative control over Sevastopol, along with the rest of the Crimean Peninsula, from the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic to the Ukrainian SSR.

4. (C) When we told Nikityuk that we were in Sevastopol to obtain a reading of the political climate on the Crimean Peninsula, he rejoined that Sevastopol was as different from Crimea as Crimea was from the rest of Ukraine. His point was that the presence of the Black Sea Fleet has been a unique burden and asset for Sevastopol. Until late in the Soviet period, Sevastopol was a closed city, requiring Sevastopol residents to obtain special permits to receive out-of-town visitors. Sevastopol's symbiotic relationship with the Russian Black Sea Fleet meant the city has strong ties to Russia. The head of PUOU's local chapter revealed, for example, that his brother was an officer in Russia's Black Sea Fleet; both were born in Sevastopol. Several contacts estimated that 20-30,000 of Sevastopol's 330,000 residents (2004 data) relied economically on the Black Sea Fleet's presence. The Socialist Party representative claimed 70 percent of Sevastopol's population wished that Crimea would return to Russian rule. He asserted that 10-15 percent of Sevastopol's population possessed both Ukrainian and Russian passports, with many retired military using their Russian passports to return annually to Russia to collect higher Russian pensions.

5. (U) While located in Ukraine's sole autonomous republic (of Crimea), Sevastopol is a "directly governed" city of Ukraine with its "mayor" (head of city administration) appointed by the central government. (Note: The city of Kiev also enjoys special status under Ukraine's constitution.) On June 23, 2005, the Ukrainian parliament (Verkhovna Rada) passed a bill sponsored by Sevastopol deputy Viktor Zayichko that, inter alia, would empower Sevastopol's Ukrainian citizen residents to elect their mayor directly.

After President Yushchenko vetoed the law, the Rada passed a law on Sevastopol a second time December 22, 2005. In addition to direct election of the mayor, the law would authorize the city administration to retain all tax and other revenues that it collects, rather than transferring any share to the central government. Yushchenko again vetoed the law and returned it to the Rada with two proposed modifications that would make it easier for the central government to dismiss the elected mayor. At the heart of the current political tussle is the fact that Sevastopol is a stronghold of opposition to Yushchenko, with 80 percent of votes recorded in favor of Viktor Yanukovych in the 2004 presidential election. This presidential prerogative also provides Kiev useful counterbalance to Moscow's influence via its Black Sea Fleet. (Note: The Rada passed the law, with Yushchenko's modifications, February 23, but it is not known whether Yushchenko will sign it or not.)

Local Politics

16. (C) Despite his minority status as an Orange representative in a solidly Blue city, Sevastopol city administration head Serhiy Ivanov has earned high marks for political leadership since his appointment by Yushchenko on February 4, 2005. Several contacts credited him with selling off city property ("land privatization") in a transparent manner that resulted in additional income for city coffers, rather than private pockets. As a result, he has a relatively high approval rating with the public. This popularity, however, has not been a bulwark against attacks from the opposition-dominated City Assembly, which has voted twice to remove him from office (to no avail, since only President Yushchenko has the power to do so under current legislation). In a sign of PUOU's weakness in the city, Ivanov abandoned his party in January to run his own eponymous bloc for the City Assembly races, allying with ex-PM Pustovoitenko's National Democratic Party and National Security and Defense Council Secretary Kinakh's Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs. The Ivanov bloc would support PUOU in the national parliamentary elections. Our contacts noted that Ivanov hoped to get better cooperation from the City Assembly if he controlled some of his own seats.

The Power of Incumbency

17. (C) The power of incumbency seemed evident in the contrast between the Our Ukraine and Party of Regions offices. Our Ukraine's office was located near the harbor in a spanking new and gleaming white office building. The Party of Regions, in contrast, was ensconced in a shabby building that perhaps doubled as Kolesnichenko's law office. When we arrived, Kolesnichenko urged us to keep our coats on, since he had no heat, and, upon our departure, he pressed his Party of Regions desk calendar on us when he noticed that we were carrying an Our Ukraine gift bag (with orange flag, scarf, and knit cap).

The Artificial Russian Language Issue

18. (C) In addition to arguing strongly in favor of direct election of Sevastopol's mayor, Kolesnichenko highlighted Party of Regions' championing of the Russian language. He alleged the central government was aggressively promoting the use of the Ukrainian language in Sevastopol, even though the Constitution required the authorities to respect the language spoken by the majority of residents in any area. Television and radio stations were being forced to up the hours of Ukrainian language programming and, Kolesnichenko claimed, the Gagarin district council had decreed that all official documents had to be in the Ukrainian language. This had required a local psychiatric hospital to reregister, as its original documentation had been in Russian. In another example, the central budget authorized 9 million hryvnias for the establishment of special kindergartens in which the Ukrainian language would be used exclusively. This, Kolesnichenko charged, contravened a Constitutional requirement to maintain balance in the support of language use.

19. (C) Our other local party leader contacts, however, downplayed the impact of the language issue. They claimed pro-Russian parties periodically sought to exploit the issue and fan fears to increase their support, but averred that Sevastopol residents in fact were not particularly exercised about the issue. Our observations during our short visit seemed to confirm that the Russian language was holding its own. Although our contacts noted the gradual spread of Ukrainian -- especially among a younger generation adapting to current realities -- signage, billboards, and advertising were invariably in Russian. The Socialist Party's Filimonov said that national television broadcasting should allow greater use of Russian. In Sevastopol, he said, Russian language speakers immediately changed the channel if they

heard Ukrainian, forcing them to rely on television broadcasting originating from Russia and strengthening their ties to the country. (Perhaps in one sign of how Sevastopol exists in a unique informational space, BYuT's Kulik claimed that, in a 2005 street survey, 42 percent of respondents did not recognize Tymoshenko when shown her picture.)

110. (U) Activism over the Russian language does continue, however. After the Party of Regions Crimean branch collected 300,000 signatures in favor of a referendum on the status of the Russian language, the Crimean Autonomous Republic's parliament passed a resolution February 22 scheduling a March 26 non-binding referendum asking Crimeans whether they favored making Russian a second official language. Back in Kiev, Presidential Secretariat Deputy Head Anatoliy Matviyenko urged the Autonomous Republic not to hold what he termed "an unconstitutional and unlawful initiative," and Crimean Prosecutor Shemchuk urged the referendum's cancellation on the same grounds. The media also reported that the For Union, "Soyuz," party gathered about 1,000 people in Simferopol February 21 demonstrating in favor of giving official status to the Russian language.

Sevastopol's National Vote

111. (C) As for how parties will fare with Sevastopol's votes in the March 26 Rada election, BYuT's Kulik cited a February 3 poll that showed Regions getting 47.3 percent; radical leftist Nataliya Vitrenko's bloc getting 8 percent; the Communists, 6.5 percent; Speaker Lytvyn's bloc, 4.7 percent; BYuT, 4.3 percent; and President Yushchenko's PUOU, 2.7 percent. IRI's poll watcher, however, extrapolated a different outcome for us based on past results, with "blue" parties obtaining a commanding majority. He predicted Regions would get 65 percent; the For Union ("Soyuz"), 12 percent; Communists, 10 percent; the SDPU(o)-led Ne Tak bloc perhaps 3 percent; PUOU in the 2-3 percent range; and Lytvyn close to zero. (Note: Both forecasts predict the pro-presidential PUOU will have difficulty in Sevastopol getting over the three-percent threshold into the local legislature.)

Likely Electoral Problems

112. (SBU) Various contacts highlighted likely electoral problems largely originating not in fraudulent intent but unfamiliarity with new procedures and requirements. Political parties seemed to be aggressively double-checking voter lists and finding numerous discrepancies. The Socialist Party's Filimonov, for example, said 20-25 percent of the list was inaccurate with respect to Socialist Party members; his party would urge its members to verify their registrations once the lists became publicly available. Regions' Kolesnichenko said 6,000 voters were missing from newly generated lists. He also said computer translations of Russian surnames into their Ukrainian equivalents were creating a problem. He gave an example of the name, "Pushkin," which derives from the Russian word for "cannon," and becomes entirely different when employing the equivalent Ukrainian word, "harmata." Kolesnichenko alleged that the problems originated from a government conspiracy to reduce voter turn-out in eastern and southern Ukraine. His accusation that the city administration was manipulating the Territorial Electoral Commissions (TECs) appeared to be canceled out by CVU rep Nikityuk's claim that current and previous Regions members were, in fact, in charge of Sevastopol's TECs.

113. (U) Visit Embassy Kiev's classified website:
www.state.gov/p/eur/kiev.
HERBST